Article:
Mitelpunkt, Shaul orcid.org/0000-0003-0045-1824 (2020) Self-Deception, War, and the Quest for the Appropriate Prophylactic. Ethics & Global Politics. pp. 48-55. ISSN 1654-6369

https://doi.org/10.1080/16544951.2020.1850044

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Ethics & Global Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/zegp20

Self-deception, war, and the quest for the appropriate prophylactic

Shaul Mitelpunkt

To cite this article: Shaul Mitelpunkt (2020) Self-deception, war, and the quest for the appropriate prophylactic, Ethics & Global Politics, 13:4, 48-55, DOI: 10.1080/16544951.2020.1850044

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/16544951.2020.1850044

Published online: 10 Dec 2020.

ETHICS & GLOBAL POLITICS
2020, VOL. 13, 48–55
https://doi.org/10.1080/16544951.2020.1850044

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

Self-deception, war, and the quest for the appropriate prophylactic

Shaul Mitelpunkt

History, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

A contribution to the roundtable on Anna Galeotti's book. This review examines the utility of taking a prophylactic approach to the study of the history of U.S. military interventions.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 24 June 2020
Revised 8 November 2020
Accepted 9 November 2020

KEYWORDS
American empire; policymakers; prophylactic; self-deception

Lies and deception make good drama. They make good comedy, too. One of the most famous liars of late-20th century American canonic culture is George Costanza, of the *NBC* sitcom *Seinfeld*, which aired in the 1990s. Costanza was the ultimate pretender: a character with deep and operational reliance on, and ethical commitment to, deception. Living with his parents in his childhood room in Queens (but withholding that fact from potential romantic partners), unemployed (but pretending he is a marine biologist), Costanza spends many of the show's episodes lying: Lying to his friends, lying to his girlfriends, lying to his parents, and constantly lying to himself. Constanza is a generous liar in that he lies big and small: he lies to get a job, lies when on the job, lies when getting fired, lies about his hair, lies about masturbation, and lies about love.

When Jerry Seinfeld tells a lie and worries that he might get exposed as a liar by a polygraph test, he turns to Costanza, a man Jerry celebrates as the 'most deceitful, duplicitous, deceptive minds of our time' – for guidance.[1] Costanza leaves Jerry with a formula that invites Jerry straight to the core of self-deception: 'It's not a lie, if you believe it.' Costanza's code goes further than simply suggesting that one becomes a more effective liar when one believes the lie. It suggests that the lie itself would actually morph into truth, should the liar only commit to believing it was so. In Anna Galeotti's discussion of the lies that followed political self-deception in the case of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution of 1964, Galeotti describes exactly this dynamic beautifully: the self-deceiving individual committing a lie 'might not feel it was a lie, in a proper sense, but merely an enrichment of the reality as he believes to be' (187). The great Costanza himself would have approved. As it happened, however, Costanza's words filled Jerry with a false sense of security as he approaches the polygraph: Jerry flunked

CONTACT Shaul Mitelpunkt shaul.mitelpunkt@york.ac.uk History, University of York, York, UK

[1] I am grateful to Alasia Nuti and Gabriele Badani for having invited me to participate in this roundtable as well as in the symposium that preceded it in March 2019, and for Anna Galeotti for the generous spirit with which she wilfully engages an interdisciplinary conversation with an historian reader.

the test. Costanza's words, true to form, yet again turned out to be untrue. The lie is out, and there would be hell to pay.

Galeotti's *Political Self-Deception* focuses on political self-deception, a concept usually studied within the confines of philosophy and cognitive psychology, applying it to the political realm – and specifically – to critical historical junctions leading to failures in American foreign policymaking. The concept of political self-deception manages, Galeotti shows, to 'piece together unjustified beliefs, with desires, mistakes and bad faith in a meaningful way' (155). The book's first three chapters are more theoretical in focus, with the last three chapters providing case studies that seek to demonstrate the theory's utility. Galeotti makes a convincing case for the potential utility of a model for political self-deception, one that would go beyond the 'common sense idea of SD', which risks 'lumping together a variety of unjustified beliefs, such as myths and ideology' (3). The circumstances when political self-deception occur, Galeotti argues, are when 'a momentous decision [needs] to be made under pressure of time', putting 'a special emotional pressure on decision makers, and hence affecting their reasoning and processing of data, which are often caught in the grip of personal wishes' (14). Galeotti explains her turn to U.S. foreign relations to mobilize examples, by stating that 'foreign policy is a privileged context for looking at SD episodes' because it is often in international crises, with decisions concerning 'military interventions, reprisals for attack, responses to terrorist action, and the like' that SD occurs (14).

Galeotti's theory is compelling, and her effort to sidestep 'the fork between pure dishonesty and cynicism, on the one hand, and honest mistakes, on the other' (2) invites nuance and care as we analyse the function of political self-deception in historical events. In one of Galeotti's simplest formulations of political self-deception, she defines it as a situation where policymakers 'believed what they wanted to believe thanks to a very common and lay twist in rationality triggered by motivations' (229–-30). Galeotti's book provides a provocative and coherent model that helps us consider the relationship between policymakers, the public, fantasy, and failure. Even if readers might question the parameters through which the model is defined and exemplified, Galeotti's effort to create a specific and analytically discrete model through which to understand the interaction between policymakers and self-deception opens up interesting and productive conversations.

A quick disclosure is probably in order: I am an historian, and Galeotti's work is not really aimed, at least at first, at practitioners in my discipline. While 'interdisciplinarity' is one of those terms habitually celebrated and abused (especially in grant applications), I think William Sewell's claim, made in 2005, that 'the nature of these dialogues has been strongly shaped by the disciplinary cultures of the fields from which the scholars come', still holds true, and provides a challenge that is not easily overcome (Sewell 2005). In reading Galeotti's work, then, I recognize my own challenge: my comments might not necessarily provide the most relevant input for the readers of *Ethics & Global Politics*! I hope, however, that they would at least provide a glimpse of how the book, and particularly its use of historical examples can be read by an historian.

In what follows I will raise some questions relating to the utility of Galettoi's model for different concerns for historians researching U.S. foreign relations. I will examine some of the ways historians have attacked similar questions from different directions. I argue that Galeotti's work would interest historians because it provides a clear model

for historians to contemplate what I think is the quite common problem of political self-deception. At the same time, I will also outline some critiques relating to the broader social context in which the model operates, regarding the choice of historical examples and its implications, and regarding the 'prophylactic' (7) ambitions of the study.

Moment vs process

In the past three decades, historians of US foreign relations have expanded the scope of their interests to adopt new methodologies inspired by the cultural turn, opening up questions of representation and meaning-making that arise out of closer attention to language (Costigliola and Hogan 2017). The growing attention to discourse analysis and to the political work language does in political and international relations brought to a growth in studies examining the central place perception and representation played in diplomatic history (Belmonte 2008; McAlister 2001; Shibusawa 2010). All that is to say that historians of U.S. foreign relations have developed a strong interest in considering policymakers both as the consumers of fantasy and stereotype, and as mass-manipulators, often at the same time.

Political Self-Deception provides a sustained and systematic methodological model through which to analyse the process through which political self-deception occurs. It casts policymakers as both perpetrators and immediate victims of their own deception, supporting the theory with three historical examples: President John F. Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs invasion into Cuba in 1961, President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Tonkin Gulf resolution of 1964, and President George W. Bush's 2003 decision to invade Iraq. Galeotti's study focuses on the very top of the decision-making circle: the President and those individual/branches most closely involved in the President's decision-making process. Rather than focus on questions of propaganda and public opinion, or the dynamics of self-deception within a 'democratic process' (which Galeotti explicitly acknowledges 'will not be pursued in this book', 14) Galeotti narrows in on the likely psychological state of the highest policymaking circle in particular decision-making junctures.

Galeotti's model seeks to explain how individuals in positions of power allowed themselves to avoid or ignore available evidence, fell prey to their own wishful thinking, and in turn, came to deceive the public and make erroneous decisions. Particularly praiseworthy is her resistance against the 'purely cognitive approach', which avoids the 'self-serving motivation in the belief formation of decision makers' (237). Distinguishing her object of study from just a common delusion, mistake, or fabrication, Galeotti argues that 'circumstances of time pressure and a clear perception of it being a momentous, exceptional decision must occur for SD [self-deception] to be likely to start' (15). The notion of a 'momentous decision' is intriguing. On one hand, there were undoubtedly such historical moments when fateful decisions took place. At the same time – does increased attention to a 'momentous decision' risk decoupling short-term processes from long-term ones in ways that create artificial neatness (useful for a model), but simplify a more complicated multi-causal process?

The relationship between specific decision-making moments (the examples Galeotti studies) that leads to the unjustified use of military force, and longer-term processes, where fantasies and self-deceptions shaped attitudes over time that rendered policymakers more susceptible to use force in certain instances, is complicated. For example, if we consider the longer trajectory of belief in the notion of 'manifest destiny' and bravado-infused declarations of American exceptionalism in the context of the 1846–8 Mexican-American War, Henry Luce's 1941 *American Century* essay, waxing lyrical about America's responsibility to join the World War II and dominate the postwar order (with an eye on Asian markets), the longstanding practice of supporting, training, and propping up authoritative regimes in Latin America under the guise of strengthening democracy and stability, or simply the high frequency of U.S. military involvement around the world, we see that neither delusion nor giddiness for military intervention was momentary lapses of reason (Ludestad 1999; Stephanson 1995; Grandin 2006; Dudziak 2012). Rather than unfortunate but correctible errors or anomalies that emerged at the specific moments Galeotti surveys in U.S. history, the continuous record of American foreign affairs is strewn with fantastic constructions, delusions, and deceptions (self or otherwise). To be fair, Galeotti is admirably cautious in repeatedly acknowledging that her argument is 'speculative' (237), and she gestures towards the relevance of broader context, especially in the conclusion.

Galeotti explicitly clarifies that self-deception 'is always mixed up with straightforward deception, and rooted in a background of ideological premises, unexamined assumptions, and prevalent uncritical opinions' (223). But her motivation to focus on the discrete phenomenon of self-deception necessitates, for clarity's sake, bracketing these defining historical processes. Such bracketing, however, risks affecting the very results of the analysis: when we lose sight of the longer trajectory of American policymaking, we can interpret naïve, reckless, self-serving, wrong, and deadly decisions in the highest ranks of office, as if they were momentous aberrations, when in fact, they were disturbingly commonplace. What room is left for the longer development of policy assumptions, cultural beliefs, and ideologies in a historical analysis that invests its attention primarily in momentous decisions? Does this move risk flattening complex processes into seemingly more manageable (and preventable) bits of history?

The fantasy of the rational policymaker

Part of Galeotti's motivation for isolating self-deception is that doing so 'opens up room for prophylactic measures' (243). In light of the fact that the historical failures Galeotti surveys in painstaking detail resulted in failure, fiasco, and widespread carnage, this is a noble goal. But the prophylactic ambition, which leads to a heightened focus on the category of self-deception, is potentially problematic insofar as it could create the misleading impression that self-deception events are fixable aberrations within an otherwise rational policymaking order: something that could be sorted out with a greater degree of oversight. This prophylactic ambition is at odds with Galeotti's recognition, emerging from her considerate historical analysis of the case studies, that a range of other causes prevents policymaking from being an arena of realism, sobriety, and objectivity.

Recent historiography introduces a range of challenges to the paradigm of realist policymaking, adopting the findings of psychology and brain science to remake our understanding of the policy-making process. Barbara Keys' 2011 groundbreaking article entitled 'Kissinger: The emotional statesman' analyses Kissinger's handling of his relationship with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. Relying on developments in the study of brain function that demonstrate the links between rational thinking and emotional structures and expectations, Keys shows that even veteran policymaker Dr Henry Kissinger, the figure most concerned with keeping the image of realpolitik sobriety, was prone to emotional manipulation and temper tantrums. Dobrynin, Keys reports, found Kissinger displayed 'hot temper and lack of self-control, combined with tinges of semi-hysteria' (Keys 2011). Historians have usually tended to ignore a consistent analysis of Kissinger's emotive behaviour, largely agreeing with the statesman himself, who prided himself as a 'consummate intellectual' and for whom to be emotional was 'to misjudge, to miscalculate, to mistake' (Keys 2011). A critical observation Keys makes bares relevance to the subject of self-deception as Galeotti studies it: 'Clear-headed, cold-hearted calculation of interests in the absence of feelings is, quite simply, neurologically impossible' (Keys 2011). In other words, if pure realist calculation is never the sole engine of policy, it seems only reasonable that a combination of self-deception and bad faith would play their roles, on a routine (rather than momentous) basis. This finding begs the question: is self-deception really best studied focusing on specific rare instances of decisive historical turning points?

The pioneering work of historian Frank Costigliola provides insights focused not on the policymakers at the very top of the hierarchy, but on the analysts compiling the reports that inform policy. Costigliola's study of George Kennan of the National Security Council, the expert most closely associated with recommending and devising the strategy of containment in 1946, shows that Kennan's policy recommendations were partially rooted in fantasies, fears, and delusions regarding the Soviet Union, and particularly in gendered and pathological understandings of the Soviet threat. After two decades of close immersion in Russian culture, Kennan experienced contradictory emotional reactions to the rise of Soviet-American rivalry. In his writing Kennan usually depicted the Soviet government in masculine, aggressive, and threatening terms, the Russian people in feminine terms demanding protection, and himself as the 'unrequited but true lover of the Russian people' (Costigliola 1997). Kennan was not a politician, but an analyst: policymakers liked to see the analysis they rely on as objective, unadulterated, and unaffected by emotion. Costigliola explains that '[b]ecause those emotion-laden tropes remained camouflaged by Kennan's expertise on Soviet affairs and his claim to realism, they offered a particularly effective rhetorical strategy for demonizing the leadership of the Soviet Union in a supposedly dispassionate analysis' (Costigliola 1997). A relevant insight from this study that informs our discussion is that, at times, even the supposedly sober analysis of the elite expert, could in fact be based on emotional impulse. In Kennan's case, the analyst's pathologies provided the foundation and prestige for policymaking norm over years.

Galeotti's focused and careful reading of the decision-making process around instances of self-deception is useful for historians who seek to accurately depict complicated processes through which uncomfortable truths are ignored or sidestepped by people who should be well positioned to recognize them. In other words, Galeotti is

looking at a particular kind of opportunities when policymakers prescribed doomed policies due to self-deception. It is easy to imagine historians adopting this model of self-deception and using it to explain a variety of policymaking situations. But what kind of policymaking situations, exactly?

The limits of procedural reform

The overall organizing commonality between the actual historical examples Galeotti mobilizes to exemplify the model's function deserves attention. By turning to three events that are generally acknowledged by the foreign policy establishment in the USA as clear fiascos which ended in forms of American humiliation, defeat, or still reverberating regional disaster (Bay of Pigs invasion, Vietnam War, Second Iraq War), and treating them as isolated accidents when policymaking went haywire (due to self-deception), the book might unintentionally create the impression that the routine business of American foreign relations was, by and large, conducted in a sound, realistic, sober, honest, and ethical manner. Part of the reason for that is again rooted in the explicit ambition of the book to provide a 'prophylactic' against the unique problem of self-deception. This focus on procedural (rather than substantive) reform implicitly normalizes American decision-making outside of those brief windows of irrationality. In that sense, the book's 'preventive' ambition (which Galeotti defines as 'of paramount importance in political analysis', 234), to focus and solve self-deception, is undermined by Galeotti's sober recognition that many of the problems surrounding American policymaking and war-making do not stem primarily from self-deception.

We might need a bigger prophylactic. In order to address the question of prevention, we need to recognize the base motivations and ambitions of American involvement around the world. Focusing on short-term failed processes, and on leaders who seem to lose touch with reality in a specific moment, we risk neglecting the structural, mental, and material continuities that frequently created fertile ground for recklessness and lack of care for the lives of non-Americans. Galeotti's strong analysis of the justifications that the Bush White House sought to establish a rationale to invade Iraq in 2003 reflects a keen awareness to those important forces. But taking them seriously within a prophylactic paradigm raises the question: in the context of U.S. foreign policy making, should prophylactic measures be administered only, or primarily, to challenge the means by which policy should be pursued more effectively, or is it even more important to challenge its substance and purpose? What actual intents and ends does the policy serve, and are these intents defensible? By focusing on flawed mechanisms, we might neglect more deeply rooted failures at the basis of American policymaking.

When Galeotti writes that policymakers need to 'learn the lesson' (12), we should spare a thought to the curricula. Was the most important lesson that Kennedy should have learned from the Bay of Pigs fiasco that he should look at CIA briefings more sceptically, with designated observers present in the room? Or would it have been even more important (if harder to imagine) for the President to learn that the United States should not attempt regime change, as it habitually did around the world, from Iran to Chile? (Gasiorowski 2013; Grow 2008). To be specific: Cubans, who had lived for years under the oppressive regime of Fulgencio Batista, propped up by American money and support, had many reasons to worry about an American-sponsored invasion. Going on

their previous experience with American involvement in Cuban affairs, arguably many Cubans had more to fear of a competent U.S.-backed invasion, than from incompetent failure that was the Bay of Pigs (Brenner, 2010).

I will conclude by briefly restating my questions. I think Galeotti's model of self-deception is useful, and it opens up many routes for investigation. But I am unsure if it should be studied only in the context of particular moments, which tends to assume (if only be contrast) a 'break' away from an otherwise sober, cool-headed, analytically driven realist policymaking environment. Is self-deception most clearly detected in cases where you can contrast a momentary lapse of reason (self-deception), from an illusory record of sobriety, good faith, and pure realism? That might be the case. If it is indeed the case, does that testify to the limited utility of the analytical study of self-deception? If we envision a policymaking arena defined routinely by emotion, impulse, and pathology, what is the benefit of studying particular moments of self-deception?

Another question concerns the issue of success or failure as defined with hindsight. It is true that when surveying the many factors that worked against the success of the Bay of Pigs invasion, the very plan seems outlandish. The thing is, there were plenty of bad ideas to go around, and at times, plans that seemed sound soured a few years down the road. For example, the 1953 decision to instruct the CIA to help topple Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and instate the oppressive regime of the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who carried out human rights violations against his rivals, was by all accounts a morally dubious one, with long-term repercussions for United States–Iranian relations. But for over 20 years, American policymakers might have concluded the plan was going relatively well: before the 1979 Iranian revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power (Alvandi 2016). Is it not problematic to hang the definition of a scenario of self-deception on the test of success/failure, considering that these are fluid concepts that both change through time, and depend on the perspective of a specific observer?

My final questions concern what the book defines as the 'the implications of SD for the democratic process' (15) which Galeotti terms as beyond the scope of her study. I do not think that the public sphere can really remain outside the scope of the study of self-deception. Indeed, the public's consent, the public understanding of American policymaking, features in the book at times – for example, in a discussion of public attitudes towards the 2003 invasion of Iraq (230–3). Galeotti posits that in a democracy the medieval double truth theory – one truth for the rulers and one for the people – does not hold, 'given that the rulers are only the representatives of the people and politically responsible in front of them' (192). In fact, however, there is overwhelming evidence that American leaders (and they were not unique in this regard) frequently worked hard to manipulate public perception of their policies, creating double truth on a routine basis (Gienow-Hecht 2017; Osgood 2008). A glance at the well over 15,000 false statements made by President Donald Trump, followed by a look at recent polls that show him as competitive in his run for re-election in 2020, suggests something even more disturbing: that the public might not care so much about being deceived. How does the model of political self-deception play in a society in which openly lying is not considered necessarily a shame, but, in the eyes of many, evidence of confidence, sophistication and playfulness? The question of apathy might be especially relevant when it comes to those aspects of foreign relations that will not affect the lives of most

Americans: military interventions abroad. It is perhaps small comfort, but at least one upside is that in the contemporary political climate, with pathological liars flying high, George Costanza could have finally fulfilled his untapped potential, and got himself a steady job as a head of state.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Alvandi. 2016. *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The USA and Iran in the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Belmonte, L. 2008. *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Brenner, P. 2010. "The Power of Metaphor: Explaining U.S. Policy toward Cuba." *Diplomatic History* 34 (2): 439–445. April. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2009.00857.x.

Costigliola, F. 1997. "Unceasing Pressure for Penetration": Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan's Formation of the Cold War." *The Journal of American History* 83 (4): 1309–339; 1310. doi:10.2307/2952904.

Costigliola, F., and M. J. Hogan. 2017. "Introduction." In *Explaining the History of US Foreign Relations*, edited by Costigliola and Hogan, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1–8; 1.

Dudziak, M. 2012. *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences*, 138–156. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gasiorowski, M. J. 2013. "The CIA's TPBEDAMN Operation and the 1953 Coup in Iran." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15 (4): 4–24. doi:10.1162/JCWS_a_00393.

Gienow-Hecht, J. 2017. "Nation Branding." In *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, edited by Costilgiola and Hogan, New York: Cambridge University Press, 232–244.

Grandin, G. 2006. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the USA, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan.

Grow, M. 2008. *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Keys, B. J. 2011. "Henry Kissinger: The Emotional Statesman." *Diplomatic History* 35 (4): 587–609; 588. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.00968.x.

Ludestad, G. 1999. "'Empire by Invitation' in Henry Luce's American Century." *Diplomatic History* 23 (2, April): 189–217. doi:10.1111/1467-7709.00163.

McAlister, M. 2001. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Osgood, K. 2008. *Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Sewell, W. 2005. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*, 3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shibusawa, N. 2010. *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy*. Camrbdige, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Stephanson, A. 1995. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Age of Right*. New York: Hill & Wang.